CASE STUDY

The politics of insecurity. Securitization of China in Australia's National Security

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Abstract

In 2017, relations between Australia and China faced a severe crisis that plunged the bilateral relations for years to come. It strengthened the Australian perception of China as a source of insecurity. Australia was no longer able to separate economic interests from security and strategic concerns in relations with China. The simultaneous "push and pull" processes of securitization and desecuritization will be taken into consideration as Australia paradoxically is simultaneously securitizing and desecuritizing China at the same time. The article focuses on the broader determinants of securitization and desecuritizaton nexus reflecting the assumption that Australia, since 2017, will be in the situation of recurring securitizing moves toward China associated with the attempts to return to "normal" policy ("politicization").

Keywords

Australia, China, security, securitization, regional security

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Author roles: Fijałkowski Ł: Conceptualization, Methodology, Supervision, Writing – Original Draft Preparation

Competing interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Grant information: The author(s) declared that no grants were involved in supporting this work.

How to cite this article:
For printed version: Fijałkowski Łukasz. "The politics of insecurity. Securitization of China in Australia's National Security". *Stosunki Międzynarodowe – International Relations* 61, (2025): 405–424. Printed 2025. https://doi.org/10.12688/stomiedintrelat.17925.2.

For online version: Fijałkowski Ł. **The politics of insecurity. Securitization of China in Australia's National Security.** Stosunki Międzynarodowe – International Relations 2025, **5**:5 https://doi.org/10.12688/stomiedintrelat.17925.2

Introduction

In recent years, the Australian security environment has been perceived as deteriorating rapidly. This perception is accompanied by growing concerns about challenges to the preferred 'rules-based' international order.[1] The latter emerged in the post-World War II era and was centred on multilateral organizations and international law, which Australia recognizes as vital for its security, prosperity, and interests. In practice, it means an international system dominated by the USA, which played the role of a dominant power both globally and regionally. Thus, among numerous threats mentioned in public statements and official documents, like terrorism, environmental problems, or illegal migration, the rivalry between the United States and China plays a crucial role. Once recognized in more favourable terms, regional security in recent times is considered more unstable, challenging the long-standing assumptions underpinning Australian security policy. As the USA is recognized as a pillar of Australian security, together with the multilateral institutional frameworks in the "immediate" (Southeast Asia and South Pacific) and "wider" regions (the Indo-Pacific), the assertive politics of China raise concerns among the politicians in Canberra, both from the ruling since 2022 Labor Party and the Liberal-National Coalition. The dilemma about China is deepened by economic interdependence that puts Australia's future prosperity at risk as a consequence of growing Chinese military power.[2] That raises the question of how to depict China: as an opportunity or threat.

In these circumstances in 2017, the relations between Australia and China faced a severe crisis that plunged the bilateral relations for the years to come and strengthen the Australian perception of China as a source of insecurity. Australia was facing a problematic situation in which it was no longer possible to separate economic interests from security and strategic concerns in relation with China. The general aim of the paper is to reconsider Australia's position toward China in the security sphere from the perspective of simultaneous "push and pull" processes of securitization and desecuritization in the years 2017–2024. The starting point is that Australia, in its current situation, is destined for ambivalent relations with China, and this inconsistency will only be deepened as the power structure in the region shifts. In the center of these dynamic regional transformations lies the question of China. Australia paradoxically is simultaneously securitizing and desecuritizing China, responding to its security and economic interests. This aspect creates an interesting case study from the position of the securitization theory.

The Australian case demonstrates that securitization is a multidimensional process, in which efforts to frame a given issue as a security threat are also intertwined

[1] B. Taylor, "Is Australia's Indo-Pacific Strategy an Illusion?," *International Affairs* 96, no. 1 (2020): 100–103, https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iiz228.

[2] M. Beeson and J.D. Wilson, "Coming to Terms with China: Managing Complications in the Sino-Australian Economic Relationship," *Security Challenges* 11, no. 2 (2015): 21–37, http://www.jstor.org/stable/26465436.

with normalization and desecuritization efforts. This is related both to the nature of the issue itself (multidimensional nature of Sino-Australian relations involving politics, economy, strategy) and the political nature of security (in terms of the adopted Copenhagen school approach), and the actions undertaken by securitizing actors. Security specialists may tend to adopt a sectoral approach, while politicians' actions may be more inconsistent over time (reflecting the dynamics of domestic and external politics). The emphasis in this article will therefore be on the general conditions that facilitate securitization itself, which, over time, make it more difficult to navigate and conduct simultaneous securitizing and desecuritizing actions. The article focuses on the broader determinants of securitization and desecuritizaton nexus reflecting the assumption that Australia, from 2017 onward, will be in the situation of recurring securitizing moves toward China associated with the attempts to return to "normal" policy ("politicization").

Theoretical and analytical framework

Australia's foreign and security policy is often analyzed through dominant International Relations theories, focusing on international order, power position, the role of international institutions and multilateralism, or identity. Realist and liberal perspectives, as well as constructivism, provide a general framework to explain Australia's politics in its "immediate" and "wider" region. The following analysis does not seek to negate the usefulness of the mentioned theories, but to look at the case study by focusing on the very process by which the securitization of China in Australian politics occurs in the first place. But this does not happen in a vacuum. The various variables considered within realist, liberal, or constructivist paradigms are relevant to the process itself, allowing the nature of the problem perceived as a threat to be grasped. In this sense, issues such as structural changes in the international environment, interdependence, minilateralism, identity, and culture can be taken into investigation.[3]

Nevertheless, for analysis, elements of securitization theory will be used, where the emphasis on the existential nature of threats appeals to realism, prioritizing the primacy of action and the dramatization of security policy.[4] At the same time, the

[3] A. Korolev, "Transition from hedging to balancing in Australia's China policy: theoretical and empirical explorations," *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 77, no. 5 (2023): 548–568, https://doi.org/10.1080/10357718.2023.2274446; J. Laurenceson, "Australia's Approach to Chinese Power and Managing Relations with Beijing: The Enduring Paradigm of Liberalism," *Journal of Contemporary China* (June, 2024), https://doi.org/10.1080/10670564.2024.2365240; K. He and H. Feng, "IR Theory and Australia's Policy Change Towards China, 2017–2022: An Introductory Essay," *Journal of Contemporary China* (June, 2024), https://doi.org/10.1080/10670564.2024.2365246.

[4] M.C. Williams, "Securitization as political theory: The politics of the extraordinary," *International Relations* 29, no. 1 (2015): 114–120, https://doi.org/10.1177/0047117814526606c; Also, "in security discourse, an issue is dramatized and presented as an issue of supreme priority; thus, by labelling it as *security*, as agent claims a need for and right to treat it by extraordinary means," B. Buzan, O. Wæver and J. De Wilde, *Security: A New Framework for Analysis* (Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1998), 26.

discursive nature of security based on the speech act emphasizes the importance of the intersubjective process based often on exceptional and panic politics (constructivism and post-structuralism).[5] Ole Wæver's securitization process is based on a speech act (to designate a threat by securitizing actor) and highlights the social process of presenting an issue as an existential threat that enables the adoption of extraordinary measures to deal with it. At the same time, the intersubjective understanding of the threat is constructed in which a particular issue is understood as an existential threat.[6] Thus, securitization is understood as the discursive process through which "an intersubjective understanding is constructed within a political community to treat something as an existential threat to a valued referent object, and to enable a call for urgent and exceptional measures to deal with the threat"[7] and in effect bring a significant political outcome.[8] Securitization process resonates in politics and in society, reflecting the process of the threat construction. Threats became "objective" only when they are considered as such, and not because of their inherited feature and they are "created" during the intersubjective process of framing the problem as a security issue, where special role is played by securitizing actor and the audience. During the process of framing, the non-security issues are included in the sphere of security. Thus, the specific issue is moving between the spectrum of politicized and securitized spheres. However, the success of securitization is not granted as the process can fail, but some aspects of the procedure can increase the probability of the final success. Specific actions and the nature of the threat can facilitate the designation of an issue as a security problem and legitimize the extraordinary measures to cope with the "existential" threat. As the issue can travel between the politicized and securitized spheres, desecuritization is also an option; however, this aspect of the theory is undertheorized.[9] Are we talking here about the reverse process to securitization, the silencing of the issue and removing it from the public discourse, or is it an automatic process which happens after the initial problem is solved? In the case of Australia, the push and pull conditions provide the basis for securitization and desecuritization of China, but the latter does not necessarily mean the return to the relations before the 2017 crisis.

While realism, liberalism, or constructivism can provide a general explanation of Australia's approach to security policy, elements of securitization theory will be used to look at the process by which, over the period 2017–2024, the relationship between Australia and China has deteriorated and the perception of the

[5] F. Ciută, "Security and the Problem of Context: A Hermeneutical Critique of Securitisation Theory," *Review of International Studies* 35, no. 2 (2009): 306, 307, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210509008535.

[6] In effect, at least two strands in securitization studies were developed: one focusing more on linguistic dimension of securitizing act, and second - more interested in social process of constructing threats.

[7] B. Buzan and O. Wæver, *Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security* (Cambridge University Press, 2003), 491.

[8] Buzan, Wæver and De Wilde, *Security: A New Framework for Analysis*, 25.

[9] Buzan, Wæver and De Wilde, *Security: A New Framework for Analysis.*

latter as a threat has been reinforced in Australia. The securitization theory, as other critical approaches to security in the case of Australia,[10] has been used to examine e.g. illegal migration or environmental problems,[11] but also in analysing the securitization of "Chinese influence.[12] However, the main focus of the article is on the general conditions and circumstances of the process of securitization in Australia and on the effect of securitization/desecuritization. Thus, the elements of discourse that can be observed in the sphere of official documents and speeches (together with the visible tension between securitization and desecuritization), as well as a practice based on specific actions of an extraordinary nature, will be taken into account. At the same time, this article does not reflect the full spectrum of securitization taking place in Australia and the concomitant efforts to relax relations. In the article, the main focus will be on the state-actor-dominated dimension of securitization/desecuritization, which is also not a fully consistent policy.

The following analysis does not focus on specific securitization moves in the form of speech acts but assumes that by adopting a series of actions Australian government is securitizing/desecuritizing China.[13] Copenhagen School's securitization framework aims "to gain an increasingly precise understanding of who securitizes, on what issues (threats), for whom (referent objects), why, with what results, and, not least, under what conditions".[14] Thus, the focus will be mainly on the last aspect, the so-called facilitating conditions, which can be grouped into external and internal aspects of the speech act. The former focuses on actor authority and is threat-related; the latter "is to follow the security form, the grammar of security, and construct a plot that includes existential threat, point of no return, and a possible way out".[15] According to the Copenhagen School, facilitating conditions are as follows: "the grammar of security", "the social conditions regarding the position of authority for the securitizing actor", and "features of the alleged threats that either facilitate

[10] A. Burke, "Australia paranoid: security politics and identity policy," in *Critical security in the Asia-Pacific*, eds. A. Burke and M. McDonald (Manchester University Press, 2007), 121–135; M. McDonald, "Constructing Insecurity: Australian Security Discourse and Policy Post-2001," *International Relations* 19, no. 3 (2005): 297–320, https://doi.org/10.1177/0047117805055408.

[11] J. Kirk and M. McDonald, "The Politics of Exceptionalism: Securitization and COVID-19," *Global Studies Quarterly* 1, no. 3 (2021), https://doi.org/10.1093/isagsq/ksab024; M. McDonald, "Deliberation and Resecuritization: Australia, Asylum-Seekers and the Normative Limits of the Copenhagen School," *Australian Journal of Political Science* 46, no. 2 (2011): 281–295, https://doi.org/10.1080/10361146.2011.568471; M. McDonald, "The Failed Securitization of Climate Change in Australia," *Australian Journal of Political Science* 47, no. 4 (2012): 579–592, https://doi.org/10.1080/10361146.2012.731487.

[12] A. Chubb, "The Securitization of 'Chinese Influence' in Australia," *Journal of Contemporary China* 32, no. 139 (2022): 17–34, https://doi.org/10.1080/10670564.2022.2052437.

[13] It follows the idea, that "the practice of securitization is the centre of analysis", Buzan, Wæver and De Wilde, *Security: A New Framework for Analysis*, 32.

[14] Buzan, Wæver and De Wilde, *Security: A New Framework*, 32.

[15] Buzan, Wæver and De Wilde, *Security: A New*, 32, 33.

or impede securitization".[16] In the analysed case study, the listed facilitating conditions of securitization are treated as general variables, indicating what needs to be considered in the analysis of Australia's securitization process. At the same time, securitization theory highlights the issue that a given problem does not have to be permanently in the security sphere; it can also be subject to desecuritization.[17] Thus, one can see a paradoxical situation in the analysed case study, in which securitization and desecuritization can occur simultaneously or interchangeably, based on different premises. By emphasizing the political nature of security, an issue may be subject to deliberate efforts to include it in the security sphere. It may also be subject to efforts to "return to standard policy". The issue of the entanglement of Australia's economic and security interests in its relationship with China may be highlighted by the often simultaneous efforts to securitize as well as desecuritize China, presenting its complex and multidimensional nature.

Australia's ambivalent relations with China

From the very beginning, Australia's relations with China have been marked by ambiguity. Diplomatic ties were formally established in 1972, following the normalization of Sino-American relations. Even earlier, under Robert Menzies' government, Australia pursued an anti-communist stance, while at the same time trade with China was already growing. The Gough Whitlam government (Labor Party) expanded these ties in the 1970s, and subsequent governments maintained this course, as the policy did not change significantly after the Coalition and Malcolm Fraser came to power. Australian engagement with China was fuelled by a sense of economic opportunity sparked by Deng Xiaoping's Chinese reforms. From there, until the early 2000s, economic benefits and broader strategic interests guided Australia's engagement with China, with minor disruptions such as the Taiwan crisis in 1996. Following this, John Howard's government adopted a strategy toward China based on a focus on shared interests and bracketing out the differentiating issues, such as human rights and democratization. Australia would cooperate on areas of shared interest and refrain from publicly expressing disagreement on other issues.[18] Subsequent changes in the region and in China's policy made maintaining this approach increasingly problematic. This was linked to broader Sino-American relations, as well as challenges to Australia's core interests. Since the 1990s Australia's dominant approach toward China was to develop economic relations together with the larger institutional cooperation. The bilateral relationship grew, and in 2007

[16] Buzan, Wæver and De Wilde, *Security*, 33.

[17] Buzan, Wæver and De Wilde, *Security*, 29; L. Hansen, "Reconstructing Desecuritisation: The Normative-Political in the Copenhagen School and Directions for How to Apply It," *Review of International Studies* 38, no. 3 (2012): 525–546, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210511000581.

[18] N. Bisley, "Australia's engagement with China: From fear to greed and back again," *International Journal* 73, no. 3 (2018): 379–398, https://doi.org/10.1177/0020702018792918.

China became Australia's largest trading partner, overtaking the previous leader Japan. In 2009, China became a major market for Australian exports (mainly raw materials), leading to a free trade agreement in 2015.[19] From this perspective, the relations between the two states have deepened, making the sudden deterioration of bilateral relations that became apparent in 2017 all the more surprising. However, behind the progress in economic and trade relations, the political and security interests of both states were inconsistent, opening the scene for securitization of China in Australia. The cracks in the picture started to be visible with the growing criticism of the Chinese political system by Australian politicians, and the perceived vulnerability of social, economic, and political institutions for Chinese interference and influence. The problem was based on the difficulty to recognize, differentiating, and responding to the actions that were natural elements of the democratic political system and society from those that were exploiting this to promote the interest of other states and silencing the opposite voices. Thus, in 2017 the securitization process gained momentum, as the then prime minister Malcolm Turnbull made a statement about the Chinese interference in Australia's domestic politics. This was presented as a serious threat to Australian political and social values. New legislation against espionage and foreign interference in Australia's internal affairs, mainly aimed at China, followed.[20] Subsequently, among others, Australia excluded Huawei from 5G network development, and in the following years, the Scott Morrison government called for an independent inquiry into the causes of the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak, which was interpreted by China as a provocation and resulted in a series of sanctions on Australian exports of certain commodities (e.g. barley, beef, wine).[21] These actions were accompanied by deteriorating relations and mutual accusations of hostile actions and incidents. Against this backdrop, Australia strengthened its strategic relationship with the USA, signing an agreement to allow Canberra to obtain nuclear-powered submarines, leading to the creation of a new minilateral format of AUKUS cooperation, designed to strengthen deterrence capabilities against China, which saw this as a manifestation of the "cold war mentality" towards China's growing influence.[22]

A normalization in diplomatic relations could be noticed since the Labor Party came to power in 2022, resulting in renewed meetings between senior politicians

[19] World Bank, "Australia trade balance, exports and imports by country and region 2007," accessed January 15, 2025, https://wits.worldbank.org/CountryProfile/en/Country/AUS/Year/2007/TradeFlow/EXPIMP.

[20] M. Turnbull, "Speech introducing the National Security Legislation Amendment (Espionage and Foreign Interference) Bill 2017," December 7, 2017, https://www.malcolmturnbull.com.au/media/speech-introducing-the-national-security-legislation-amendment-espionage-an.

[21] J. Wilson, "Australia Shows the World What Decoupling From China Looks Like, Foreign Policy," *Foreign Policy,* November 9, 2021, https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/11/09/australia-china-decoupling-trade-sanctions-coronavirus-geopolitics/.

[22] V. Ni, "Cold War Echoes as Aukus Alliance Focuses on China Deterrence," *The Guardian*, September 16, 2021, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/sep/16/cold-war-echoes-as-aukus-alliance-focuses-on-china-deterrence.

from both sides. In 2022, Australia's Defence Minister Richard Marles held talks with Chinese Defence Minister Wei Fenghe at the Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore. In the same year, there was a meeting between Xi Jinping and Anthony Albanese in Bali during the G20 summit, and the visit of Australian Foreign Minister Penny Wong in Beijing. In 2023 the trade ministers of both countries met in Beijing, followed in November by Albanese visit in China for the first time since 2016. In 2024, China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi visited Canberra and then Chinese Prime Minister Li Qiang visited Australia (the first visit to Australia by a Chinese Premier since 2017). Later, in October in the margins of the East Asia Summit in Vientiane Albanese met Li Qiang, and in November in the margins of the G20 Leaders' Summit in Rio de Janeiro Albanese met Xi Jinping once more.[23] The series of meetings and reciprocal visits undoubtedly indicate a move towards the normalization of mutual relations. Nevertheless, Australia continues to look at China as a factor disrupting the existing regional order.

Australia's official documents (like Defence Strategic Review 2023 and National Defence Strategy 2024) still indicate a further strengthening of security relations with the USA and intends to expand the capabilities of the Australian Armed Forces beyond the standard stabilization or FONOPs' missions. Thus, Australia simultaneously indicates the need for de-escalation of tensions in relations with China, together with visible concern about the changing security and strategic dynamic in the Indo-Pacific region. The weakened position of Australia's major ally, the USA, is at the centre of increasing unease and perception of growing insecurity in Canberra (together with the need to redefine its security approach).[24] Additionally, the growing uncertainty about China is discernible not only at a governmental level but also at a societal level. In the 2025 survey conducted by the Lowy Institute, there is a noticeable stabilization of the trend seen since 2018, namely a decrease in the view that China is primarily an economic partner and an increase in the view that it is a security threat to Australia. Since 2018, there has been a decline in a more positive vision of China from 82% to 50% in 2025. At the same time, the perception of China as a threat has increased from 12% to 47%. It is noticeable that there has been some recent correction in perception, but a strong increase in concerns towards China is evident. This corresponds with opinions regarding confidence towards individual countries that they will act responsibly. In the opinion poll, the undisputed winner is Japan enjoying 90% positive views. The United States enjoys a less clear-cut opinion, with 36% of respondents viewing it positively and 64% negatively. In the case of China, there is a practical reversal

[23] The Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, "China country brief," accessed September 6, 2025, https://www.dfat.gov.au/geo/china/china-country-brief.

[24] R. Dunley, "Plan B?: Reconsidering Australian Security in the event of a post US alliance era," *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 78, no. 4 (2024): 479–497, https://doi.org/10.1080/10357718.2024.2369788.

of views towards Japan –79% of respondents view them negatively, and only 20% positively.[25]

The process of seeing China as a dominantly source of insecurity in terms of strategic and security interest, together with a vision of economic opportunity, brings an interesting aspect to the securitization/desecuritization. The facilitating condition of securitization, namely the nature of the threat, could be mentioned here. The tradition of Australian foreign and security policy is based on the specific perception of insecurity and strategic interests derived from historical, geographical, political, and cultural factors. This brings the elements of continuity that ease the securitization of China on one hand, but also creates the factors to exploit the economic opportunity associated with the economic growth of China. In general, geographical isolation, together with historical and political trajectory, influence Australia's strategic position toward Asian states and acceptance "that it cannot realistically expect to defend its homeland alone and friendless against a major-power adversary".[26] Hence, the reliance on a close alliance with the dominant Anglo-Saxon power presents also a difficulty in adjusting to the situation when a non-Western country emerges as a potential major power.

Since the beginning of the Cold War, there is a noticeable continuation of the basic elements of perceptions of its international environment in Australia. As W. Friedmann wrote in 1951: "Two factors above all have led to the emergence of a distinctive Australian foreign policy. First, the dramatic change in Britain's international position; secondly, the emergence of Asia as a decisive force in world affairs".[27] The first factor led to the assumption of the need for close cooperation with the United States, which after the end of World War II had grown to become Australia's main ally. This cooperation was institutionalized in 1951 in the form of the Australia, New Zealand, and United States Security Treaty (ANZUS), involving also defence and foreign policy ministerial consultations (Australia-United States Ministerial Consultation, AUSMIN) and military and intelligence cooperation (the Five Eyes). The second issue is related to the changes that took place in East and South Asia during this period and the eventual emergence of a new regional order in which larger (China, India) and smaller (Indonesia) powers started to play an important role. Hence, if in the early 1950s, the main reasons for the reorientation of Australian politics were the result of WWII and post-war developments, "it may be said that Australian foreign policy is determined by four major factors which are

[25] "The Lowy Institute Poll 2025," Lowy Institute, accessed September 6, 2025, https://poll.lowyinstitute.org/report/2025/.

[26] M.R. Watson, "Australia and the Quad. A Watering Can or a Hammer?," *The National Bureau of Asian Research*, October 30, 2023, https://www.nbr.org/publication/australia-and-the-quad-a-watering-can-or-a-hammer/.

[27] W. Friedmann, "Australian Foreign Policy," *International Affairs* 27, no. 3 (1951): 312, https://doi.org/10.2307/2606421.

not always easy to coordinate. In the first place, Australia is and remains an active and loyal member of the British Commonwealth of Nations. In the second place, Australia's sense of isolation, and the change in the world balance of power, is leading her to look to the United States as the major protector".[28] These two factors can now be interpreted as a tendency in Australian politics to be in close alliance with the dominant Anglo-Saxon power of the day and to maintain some relationship with the former metropolis (with which Australia is formally linked through the political system, but also by such formats like Five Powers Defence Arrangement, AUKUS, and Five Eyes). The third factor that emerges here is the recognition that "Australia is faced, more urgently and inescapably (…) with the problem of a complete readjustment of political, social, and human relations with the new nations of Asia". Currently, the primary aspect here is the issue of China and the challenges connected with major transformations in the regional order stemming from that country's new position. A final element to note is the role Australia has played "in the United Nations as well as in the functional international agencies",[29] which translates into general support for multilateral cooperation in the region and for the so-called "rules-based order". Thus, despite changing circumstances, the elements of continuity over the last few decades have been evident in the strategic approach of Australia. These are the close relationship, particularly in the security sphere, with the United States; the importance of Asia (now in the Indo-Pacific formula, and states like China, India, Japan, and Indonesia); and active participation in the regional multilateral institutions, as part of Australia's role as a "middle power" and preference for "rules-based order".[30]

In the 1990s, Australia continued to maintain close relations with the USA, but also based its economic development on deepening its trade relations with its Asian neighbours, particularly China, together with the expansion of its involvement in regional institutions (APEC, ARF, EAS). Thus, the element of ambiguity could be found in Australia's foreign and security policy as a result of the deep economic interdependence between Australia and China, with growing insecurity derived from Beijing's role in regional affairs. Nevertheless, the scale of Australia's reliance in the economic field on China is still growing. China is Australia's largest trading partner accounting for 26% of goods and services trade in 2023,[31] and the level of interconnectedness, despite a particularly turbulent period between 2017 and 2023, has been steadily increasing. In 2023–2024 two-way trade with China increased

[28] Friedmann, "Australian Foreign," 312.

[29] Friedmann, "Australian," 312.

[30] B. Scott, M. Nyst and S. Roggeveen, "Australia's Security and the Rules–Based Order," Lowy Institute, accessed January 10, 2025, https://interactives.lowyinstitute.org/features/rules-based-order/; C. Harijanto, "Middle-power behaviors: Australia's status-quoist/Lockean and Indonesia's reformist/Kantian approaches to crises of legitimacy in the Indo-Pacific," *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 78, no. 1 (2023): 40–57, https://doi.org/10.1080/10357718.2023.2283473.

[31] "China country brief."

2.6%, totalling 325 billion USD. Australian goods and services exports to China totalled 212.7 billion USD in 2023–2024.[32] In effect, the tendency of one-dimensional approach to respond on the China question could be observed between economic "doves" and security "hawks", which makes it difficult to adopt an appropriate approach to issues such as Chinese Belt and Road Initiative.

Securitization of China in 2017 and Deterioration of Bilateral Relations

From Australia's perspective, China's emerging dominance in the region is becoming the biggest security concern for Australia.[33] The matter is undoubtedly complicated by the economic interdependence between the two countries. Thus, each successive government has had to take into account the growing level of economic interdependence in its policy toward China. On the other hand, with China's growing assertiveness since Xi Jinping, it has become increasingly difficult to reconcile economic ties with security interests, leading to an unprecedented crisis in mutual relations soon after the signing of the Free Trade Agreement (ChAFTA). After 2017, a series of crises in mutual relations have not only cooled official ties but also increased distrust from the Australian public towards China following the breakdown of intergovernmental relations. The rapidly deteriorating situation since 2017 was a process in which a group of interlinked factors affected the Australian perception of the Chinese threat. First of all, the evidences of Chinese interference in Australian domestic politics and economy need to be mentioned; then, the situation around Taiwan and the possible consequences of the conflict for Australia; the Chinese claims in the South China Sea and maritime incidents; China's increasing expansion in the South Pacific; Chinese economic sanctions on Australia in 2020 in response to Australian call for independent investigation on the outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic; also the information reaching the Australian public on Chinese actions in Xinjiang in 2017 and Hong Kong in 2020–2021 have impact on popular attitudes, showing in effect that opinion about China decrease drastically during few years. In the "feelings towards other nations" ranking in 2025 China scores only 37 out of a possible 100 when e.g. New Zealand gained 85, Japan 76, the UK 75, and the United States 50.[34] Thus, the relations between Australia and China have been influenced by aggregated variables of changing regional security environment, domestic political interference, and public attitudes.[35]

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[32] "China country."

[33] From the Australian Deputy PM R. Marles during the 2 + 2 dialogue in India, November, 2023; D. Peri and K. Bhattacherjee, "China is the biggest security anxiety for India and Australia, says Australian Deputy Prime Minister," *The Hindu*, November 21, 2023, https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/strong-india-australia-ties-key-for-peace-security-rajnath-singh/article67555764.ece.

[34] "The Lowy Institute Poll."

[35] B. Gill, "Explaining the Troubled Australia-China Relationship: A Perspective from Australia," *China Review* 23, no. 1 (2023): 250–263.

The moment when Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull declared a threat to Australian democracy and way of life in December 2017 in response to disturbing reports of Chinese influence could be recognized as successful securitizing move. For several years, the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation has been taking steps to inform on Chinese actions that undermine national interests, and these actions finally began to resonate with politicians and the media in 2017.[36] Thus, the process of securitization has been noticeable following the 2017 crisis with recent moves for normalization and return to "standard" political relations (the elements of desecuritization). Nevertheless, Canberra adopted several measures to reduce the country's vulnerability to Chinese actions and to secure Australia's national interests. Even when Prime Minister Albanese took steps to reduce tensions, it was accompanied by a continuation of initiatives growing out of concerns about China (desecuritization combined with further securitization).

Before 2017, different governments were not eager to respond with emergency measures on the array of issues linked with Chinese activity. During that time, especially during the Kevin Rudd government (Labor Party, 2007–2010), Australia deepened its economic relations with China signing in 2010 a series of economic agreements worth 10 billion AUD. Also, Australia withdrew from minilateral cooperation in the format of the first QUAD in 2008 presenting an ambiguous posture toward the growing tension between the United States and China. At the same time in Defence White Paper from 2009 the Rudd's government adopted the perspective that East Asia would be transformed strategically by the rise of China in the years to 2030. This new reality will need to be confronted and require military build-up as a response to strategic transformation and China's rising military power.[37] Rudd's government adopted the vision that shortly China's economic success will contribute to strengthening the regional security environment and the global rules-based order. But at the same time, China's military modernization will undermine the regional order which reflects in general the growing schizophrenic view of China.[38]

After Julia Gillard (Labor Party, 2010–2013) became Prime Minister, a move to strengthen relations with the United States was made through the deployment of US Marines near Darwin. Also, the relations with India improved by resolving the issue of uranium sales and supplies which was finalized in 2014.[39] However, it was under Tony Abbott of the Liberal Party (2013–2015) that FTA talks were finalized in 2014 and the China-Australia Free Trade Agreement (ChAFTA) entered

[36] Chubb, "The Securitization of 'Chinese Influence' in Australia."

[37] Australian Government, "Defence White Paper 2009," https://www.defence.gov.au/about/strategic-planning/defence-white-paper.

[38] S. Firth, *Australia in International Politics*, 146.

[39] M. Safi, "Australia's uranium deal with India 'risks weakening safeguards'," *The Guardian*, October 3, 2014, https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2014/oct/03/australias-uranium-deal-with-india-risks-weakening-safeguards.

into force a year later. Also in 2015, Abbott's government accepted the lease of Darwin port for 99 years to Chinese company Landbridge, provoking some security concerns.[40] However, even with some unease regarding the Chinese actions, the abrupt deterioration of bilateral relations was unexpected. As the change came during Malcolm Turnbull's government (Liberal Party, 2015–2018), international factors also need to be taken into consideration such Chinese Belt and Road Initiative, tensions in the South China Sea, and American "Pivot to Asia" during Barack Obama and Indo-Pacific Strategy during Donald Trump's administration, reflecting the elements of balancing against China. Nevertheless, the domestic factors within Australia, specifically scandals demonstrating Chinese aspirations to influence Australian politics, became crucial in the deterioration of bilateral relations.

Some worrying signals regarding China's actions in Australia were highlighted in 2016 with a cyber-attack on Australian institutions.[41] But it was 2017 when Sam Dastyari scandal[42] provoked the Australian government to take harsh legislation on restrictions and ban on foreign funding of political parties, generally designed as a move against Chinese interference in Australia's domestic affairs.[43] These measures could be interpreted as a sign of successful securitization act, with Malcolm Turnbull acting as a securitizing actor. The next steps deepen the process of securitization, and the repeated incidents reinforced the perception of insecurity in relations with China. Thus, Australia joined the revived project of Quad 2.0. Additionally, in 2018 a military incident took place in the South-China Sea in which China's military "issued 'robust' challenges to three Australian warships as they travelled through the South China Sea to Vietnam".[44] Similar incidents involving the Australian and Chinese military occurred in the following years, helping to sustain the threat perception of China and the securitization mode in Australia.

The lowest point of relations between Australia and China was during the time of Scott Morrison (Liberal Party 2018–2022) as a prime minister. In 2019 a series of events worsened Sino-Australian relations, as Australia started an

[40] "Andrew Robb takes role with Chinese company that operates Darwin port," *The Guardian*, October 30, 2016,https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2016/oct/31/andrew-robb-chinese-company-operates-darwin-port.

[41] L. Besser, J. Sturmer and B. Sveen, "Government computer networks breached in cyber attacks as experts warn of espionage threat," *ABC News*, August 28, 2016, https://www.abc.net.au/news/2016-08-29/chinese-hackers-behind-defence-austrade-security-breaches/7790166.

[42] "Sam Dastyari resignation: How we got here," *ABC News*, December 12, 2017, https://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-12-12/sam-dastyari-resignation-how-did-we-get-here/9249380.

[43] E. Douek, "What's in Australia's New Laws on Foreign Interference in Domestic Politics," *Lawfare*, July 11, 2018, https://www.lawfaremedia.org/article/whats-australias-new-laws-foreign-interference-domestic-politics.

[44] "Australian warships 'challenged' by Chinese navy in South China Sea," *The Guardian*, April 20, 2018, https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2018/apr/20/australian-warships-challenged-by-chinese-navy-in-south-china-sea.

investigation on the attempt to install a Chinese agent at the Federal Parliament[45] and cyber-attacks on parliament and political parties took place which brought suspicion about China's involvement.[46] Moreover, Australian citizen Yang Hengjun was arrested in China on espionage charges.[47] Also, information about the scale of Chinese espionage activity in Australia by former Chinese "spy" Wang Liqiang sparks controversy.[48] In 2020 China adopted the elements of "wolf warrior diplomacy"[49] as the Chinese Embassy published "the list of 14 griefs", accusing the Australian government of numerous actions directed against China and its citizens. The perspective adopted by the Embassy mentioned the instances of deliberate harassment, prosecutions, interference, disinformation, etc.[50] In this same year, Chinese foreign ministry spokesman Zhao Lijian circulated through his Twitter account a computer graphic depicting an Afghan child having their throat cut by an Australian soldier in connection to the Brereton Report about the Australian war crimes in Afghanistan. The Chinese response to this action was wildly perceived in Australia as the next stage of escalation in the dispute between both countries and unified Australian politicians in condemning the incident and China.[51] In 2021 the elements of further escalation took place as Australia decided to cancel two agreements between Victoria state and China from 2018 and 2019,[52] and China imposed economic sanctions on Australia in response to a call for international investigation about the sources of COVID-19.

In the face of the deteriorating international environment, Australia's government decided to start a process of strengthening its Navy by acquiring nuclear-powered

[45] "Australia investigates alleged Chinese plot to install spy MP," BBC, November 25, 2019, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-australia-50541082.

[46] B. Worthington, "Scott Morrison reveals foreign government hackers targeted Liberal, Labor and National parties in attack on Parliament's servers," *ABC News*, February 18, 2019, https://www.abc.net.au/news/2019-02-18/prime-minister-scott-morrison-cyber-attack-hackers/10821170.

[47] H. Davidson, B. Doherty and P. Karp, "Australian academic Yang Hengjun given suspended death sentence by Chinese court," *The Guardian*, February 5, 2024, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/feb/05/australian-academic-yang-hengjun-given-suspended-death-sentence-by-chinese-court-writer-wong.

[48] A. Greene, "Chinese spy Wang Liqiang alleges Beijing ordered overseas murders, including in Australia," *ABC News*, November 23, 2019, https://www.abc.net.au/news/2019-11-23/chinese-spy-wang-liqiang-seeks-political-asylum-australia-report/11732174.

[49] D. Xiaolin and L. Yitong, "The Rise and Fall of China's Wolf Warrior Diplomacy," *The Diplomat*, September 22, 2023, https://thediplomat.com/2023/09/the-rise-and-fall-of-chinas-wolf-warrior-diplomacy/.

[50] D. Hurst, "China's infamous list of grievances with Australia 'should be longer than 14 points', top diplomat says," *The Guardian*, November 19, 2021, https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2021/nov/20/chinas-infamous-list-of-grievances-with-australia-should-be-longer-than-14-points-top-diplomat-says.

[51] A. Rej, "Australia Livid as Chinese Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Tweets Offensive Image," *The Diplomat*, November 30, 2020, https://thediplomat.com/2020/11/australia-livid-as-chinese-foreign-ministry-spokesperson-tweets-offensive-image/.

[52] K. Needham, "Australia cancels Belt and Road deals; China warns of further damage to ties," *Reuters*, April 21, 2021, https://www.reuters.com/world/china/australia-cancels-victoria-states-belt-road-deals-with-china-2021-04-21/.

submarines which started a new minilateral platform for cooperation with the United States and Great Britain (AUKUS).[53] In February 2022 a new incident in the Arafura Sea put tensions in already strained bilateral relations as a Chinese warship illuminated an Australian maritime surveillance aircraft with an onboard laser.[54] Additionally, on 19 April 2022, China signed a security agreement with the Solomon Islands,[55] which was largely perceived as a sign of failure of Australian policy in its "intermediate" region. The calls for revision of policy toward the Pacific states start to be noticeable.[56] All of this further helps to designate China in terms of the threat to Australian national interests, but also to political and social values. Internal and international factors deepen the process of securitization, however, with growing concerns about the further escalation of animosity in bilateral relations.

In 2022, the Labor Party won elections and Anthony Albanese became the new Prime Minister. On the one hand, steps were taken towards normalization, including a series of diplomatic meetings between representatives of Australia and China. However, this did not end the incidents involving the military personnel of both countries. In 2022 Chinese fighter intercepted an "enemy" Australian surveillance aircraft during its routine patrol in international airspace over the South China Sea.[57] In next year, the Chinese destroyer operated its sonar during an Australian diving operation aboard the frigate HMAS Toowoomba in international waters near Japan, which "posed a risk to the safety of the Australian divers" and was condemned by Australia's prime minister as "dangerous, unsafe and unprofessional".[58] Then in May 2024, during routine activities in international waters in the Yellow Sea as part of Operation Argos (enforcement of United Nations Security Council sanctions against North Korea), an Australian helicopter launched from HMAS Hobart was intercepted by Chinese fighter aircraft, posing a "risk to the aircraft and personnel".[59] In the same year, as an effect of the reports of China recruiting pilots

[53] B. O'Connor, L. Cox and D. Cooper, "Australia's AUKUS 'bet' on the United States: nuclear-powered submarines and the future of American democracy," *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 77, no. 1 (2023): 45–64, https://doi.org/10.1080/10357718.2022.2163977.

[54] E. Graham, "Laser incident near Australia paints China in a bad light," *IISS*, February 25, 2022, https://www.iiss.org/online-analysis/online-analysis/2022/02/laser-incident-near-australia-paints-china-in-a-bad-light/.

[55] E. Graham, "Assessing the Solomon Islands' new security agreement with China," *IISS*, May 5, 2022, https://www.iiss.org/online-analysis/online-analysis/2022/05/china-solomon-islands/.

[56] L. Moore, "A dysfunctional family: Australia's relationship with Pacific Island states and climate change," *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 78, no. 3 (2024): 286–305, https://doi.org/10.1080/10357718.2024.2316098.

[57] A. Greene, "Chinese military video appears to show 'dangerous' intercept of Australian aircraft over South China Sea," *ABC News*, September 17, 2024, https://www.abc.net.au/news/2024-09-18/video-shows-chinese-military-intercept-of-australian-aircraft/104362682.

[58] N. Gan and B. Lendon, "Australian prime minister accuses Chinese navy of 'dangerous' conduct," CNN, November 20, 2023, https://edition.cnn.com/2023/11/20/asia/australia-albanese-china-navy-dangerous-conduct-intl-hnk/index.html.

[59] Australian Government Defence, "Statement on unsafe and unprofessional interaction with PLA-Air Force," May 6, 2024, https://www.defence.gov.au/news-events/releases/2024-05-06/statement-unsafe-and-unprofessional-interaction-pla-air-force.

from Five-Eyes countries to train carrier pilots, Australia adopted into force The Safeguarding Australia's Military Secrets Act that introduced legal regulations preventing uncontrolled employment of consultants with military knowledge by other countries.[60] New incidents occur in 2025, involving an Australian surveillance aircraft in the South China Sea, and the Chinese military shadowing Australian and Canadian warships through the Taiwan Strait. Also, in February 2025 three Chinese navy vessels conducted drills and traversed waters near Australia, which provoked Canberra to express criticism over the lack of sufficient notice given for the live-fire drills. Hence, there is a noticeable time of tension translating into a sense of strategic insecurity and language highlighting the intensity of adverse changes in the regional environment.

Securitization/Desecuritization nexus

Securitization of China in 2017, indicates that the previous approach based on separation of economic cooperation from potentially sensitive issues is increasingly difficult, if not impossible, to maintain. This stems from China's own actions and the changes taking place in the Indo-Pacific region, as well as Australia's interpretation of them. At the same time, successful securitization facilitates such actions in the future. Therefore, based on a longer tradition of insecurity in relation to the Asia-Pacific region, the perception of China, while not always as a direct threat, will certainly become more entrenched as a factor reinforcing fear and concern about Australia's security interests. In this case, economic and political interests point to the need for China's desecuritization, which is nevertheless hampered by structural factors (power shift in the region) and the intersubjective social perception of China (as Australians remain wary of their major trading partner).[61]

Even if the signs of normalization are recognizable in mutual relations between Australia and China, still in terms of security the situation is far from the earlier position before the crisis. The elements of prior suspicion are now part of the security language adopted in official documents and statements in 2023 and 2024. The vision of urgency and dramatic shift of power influenced the adoption of a "whole-of-nation" approach to security based on the mass mobilization of national resources for foreign policy objectives, widening the "whole-of-government" approach.[62] In terms of national defence, the strategy of denial was developed as a new cornerstone of defence planning that is designed to deter a potential adversary from taking actions that would be adverse to Australia's interests and regional stability. The

[60] Australian Government Defence, "New law in place for overseas work," May 7, 2024, https://www.defence.gov.au/news-events/news/2024-05-07/new-law-place-overseas-work.

[61] "The Lowy Institute."

[62] "Whole-of-Nation Approach to International Policy," *Asia-Pacific Development, Diplomacy and Defence Dialogue*, February, 2024, https://asiapacific4d.com/idea/whole-of-nation/.

strategy of denial involves changing a potential adversary's belief that it could achieve its ambitions with military force at an acceptable cost.[63]

During the Shangri-La Dialogue defence summit in 2023, a more diplomatic approach was adopted by Prime Minister Albanese. In a speech given on 4 June 2023, the "whole-of-nation" concept was mentioned together with strong support for "rules-based order", maintaining multilateral cooperation and institutions. The stabilization of the relationship with China was mentioned, highlighting the existence of "fundamental differences in our two nations' systems of government, our values and our worldviews". Also, the alliance with the United States is central to Australia's foreign policy, based on "a bond of shared values and it remains a partnership of shared strategic interest, a common determination to preserve stability, prosperity and peace".[64] As the official statement of Albanese refers to the "standard" motives of Australian foreign policy, trying not to increase tensions in already strained relations with China, more ambiguous language is used in Defence Strategic Review 2023 and National Defence Strategy 2024. The vision of the challenges to regional stability and prosperity arising from strategic competition between the USA and China is presented together with other risks (like climate change). In sum, it creates a very challenging international environment to which Australia needs to adjust. The decline in positive perceptions of China and the consolidation of its perception as a security threat is also reflected in official documents that can be seen as expressing the official position of the government. Despite notable efforts by the Labor Party officials to normalize the relationship with China, one finds in the documents an assessment pointing to the generally deteriorating international situation in which Australia finds itself and one of the key factors in these negative trends is the issue of China.

Hence, the 2023 Defence Strategic Review makes the alarmist observation that the previous assumptions behind Australia's defence doctrine ("deterring and responding to potential low-level threats from a small or middle power in our immediate region") no longer apply.[65] Consequently, an approach emphasizing national defence is to be developed "in the face of potential threats in our region", incorporating a whole-of-government and whole-of-nation approach to security.[66] The need for a more proactive approach from Australia, translating into support for sustaining the Indo-Pacific regional balance of power, is highlighted. This requires deepening diplomatic engagement and greater defence capabilities to counter the use of force and

[63] Australian Government, "2024 National Defence Strategy," 2024, https://www.defence.gov.au/about/strategic-planning/2024-national-defence-strategy-2024-integrated-investment-program.

[64] "Keynote Address," *IISS Shangri-La Dialogue*, June 1, 2023, https://www.iiss.org/events/shangri-la-dialogue/shangri-la-dialogue-2023/keynote-address/.

[65] Australian Governance, "National Defence: Defence Strategic Review 2023," 2003, 9, https://www.defence.gov.au/about/reviews-inquiries/defence-strategic-review.

[66] "National Defence: Defence Strategic Review."

reduce the risk of conflict.[67] In the case of the 2024 National Defence Strategy, it is emphasized explicitly that Australia faces the most challenging strategic environment since World War II,[68] while negative trends accelerated and "Australia no longer enjoys the benefit of a ten-year window of strategic warning time for conflict".[69]

This view explicitly referred to the growing strategic competition between the USA and China as a fundamental feature of Australia's security environment.[70] This rivalry is played out "in military and non-military ways, including economic and diplomatic" and "accompanied by an unprecedented conventional and non-conventional military build-up in our region".[71] However, Australia is part of this trend seeking to accelerate the modernization of its armed forces (e.g. the procurement of 72 F35A aircraft, the nuclear-powered submarine program). Nevertheless, there are also opinions that the pace and scale of these changes are inadequate and "may not deliver the right capabilities at the right time to achieve the strategic deterrence effect".[72] Despite a general reluctance to openly antagonize China and point to its economic importance to Australia's continued development, it is pointed out that "China has employed coercive tactics in pursuit of its strategic objectives, including forceful handling of territorial disputes and unsafe intercepts of vessels and aircraft operating in international waters and airspace in accordance with international law".[73] This is not only based on an assessment of Chinese activities in the South China Sea but also on a growing number of Sino-Australian incidents, claimed to be dangerous and unprofessional by Australian officials. More broadly, what is happening in Australia's immediate environment is related to the increasing volatility "in multiple regions, including Europe and the Middle East", which affects Australia both militarily (through cooperation with the USA and NATO countries) and economically. This translates into the Indo-Pacific, where the "grey-zone activities have also expanded" by employing para-military forces and threats posed by state and non-state actors for cybersecurity. China's actions in the South China Sea are presented here as an example of such activity.[74]

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[67] "National Defence: Defence Strategic."

[68] Australian Government, "2024 National Defence Strategy," 2024.

[69] Australian Government, "2024 National Defence Strategy."

[70] "2024 National Defence Strategy."

[71] "2024 National Defence."

[72] M. Ryan, "Australia's New National Defence Strategy: Mostly Continuity but with Some Change," *CSIS*, May 3, 2024, https://www.csis.org/analysis/australias-new-national-defence-strategy-mostly-continuity-some-change.

[73] "2024 National Defence."

[74] "2024 National."

Conclusion

The current state of bilateral relations between Australia and China (in 2025) is still far from being fully normalized but has nevertheless improved. However, it seems unlikely to improve in total. This is related to factors that, particularly on the Australian side, are the result of broader circumstances over which it does not have direct influence. Hence, the securitization of China is an outcome of international and domestic factors, combined with simultaneous efforts at desecuritization, understood here as the normalization of mutual relations, mainly through the ever-deepening economic interdependence. However, the latter is also seen as an area of increased competition and insecurity. The ambiguity of the relationship with China is rooted in situation, where both countries have a vested interest in mutual trade relations, with growing tensions stemming from the wider American-Chinese rivalry.[75]

Since 2017, Australian position toward China presents growing security concerns that have gained necessary significance to start a securitization process. As the specific issues moves between politicized and securitized spheres, the Australian perception of China presents an interesting case study in which securitization is followed by attempts to normalize the relations. This desecuritizing factor needs further investigation, as desecuritization is generally undertheorized in the Copenhagen School approach to security. Furthermore, additional studies are needed regarding the way how desecuritization works in Australian case (e.g. as purely reverse process to securitization or the strategy of politicization).

Securitization of China is strengthened due to numerous incidents involving military, espionage accusations, and interference in Australian politics. However, in the analysis of securitization the objective existence of threats is not the main aspect of the analysis, as a more discursive and intersubjective approach is applied. Thus, in the case of Australia, since 2017, the nature of the possible existential threats from China was not the main aspect of the analysis. Instead, different actions and events were framed as security threats and treated as such, producing response in the form of legislation, revision of the approach to national security, and increase in military spendings. Securitization is also not granted forever, thus since 2022 Australia has taken steps to lower the tension and desecuritize China. However, it is reasonable to assume that Australia's situation will not change much in its relations with China and that tensions and ambivalent relations with China will become more apparent. The elements of inconsistency will be deepened as long as Australia is favourable toward the security relations with the United States (which creates new sorts of challenges as American foreign policy is becoming more unpredictable under the second Donald Trump's administration). Thus, the Sino-American

[75] M. Murad, "Australia-China Relations: From Comprehensive Strategic Partners to Frenemies," *The Diplomat*, November 25, 2024, https://thediplomat.com/2024/11/australia-china-relations-from-comprehensive-strategic-partners-to-frenemies/.

tension will complicate the politics of Australia and the tendency to securitize China will be noticeable. In strategic terms Australia is deeply involved in US-oriented initiatives like AUKUS. At the same time, Australia's interest is in a stable relationship with China, acknowledging that substantial differences exist between the two states. Thus, "Australia will continue to cooperate with China where we can, disagree where we must, manage our differences wisely, and, above all else, engage in and vigorously pursue our own national interest".[76] Consequently, the next round of securitization still looms on the horizon.

Ethics and consent

Ethical approval and consent were not required.

Data availability statement

No data are associated with this article.

[76] "National Defence: Defence."